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Couperus, Stefan; Tortola, Pier Domenico

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Right-wing populism's (ab)use of the past in Italy and the Netherlands

Stefan Couperus

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

s.couperus@rug.nl

Pier Domenico Tortola

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

p.d.tortola@rug.nl

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ABSTRACT

Historical analysis is increasingly used as a tool in the study of present-day populism in Europe. The past is often explored as a source of analogies through which to examine today's populism, and at other times in search of causal mechanisms to explain the current populist wave. In this paper we focus on a third kind of link between populism and the past, namely the ways populist movements and leaders use and abuse history and historical memory in their quest for mass support. This angle on the populism/history nexus can yield deep insight into the ideological make-up of these movements and their voters, and populism's discursive dynamics and strategies. Focusing on contemporary right-wing populism and its approach to the dark past of European countries, the paper conducts an exploratory analysis that posits three ways in which the past is (ab)used by populists: (a) the positive reassessment of dark history; (b) the recourse to fake history; (c) the evocation and subsequent denial of links with the dark past. In examining each, we use examples taken from the cases of Italy and The Netherlands to check the plausibility of our categories across different national cases.

Keywords: populism, history, Italy, the Netherlands.

Corresponding author: Stefan Couperus, Faculty of Arts. European Politics and Society. Oude Kijk in't Jatstraat, 26. 9712 EK Groningen (The Netherlands).

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INTRODUCTION

Populism, particularly in its right-wing version, is one of the most interesting, and arguably the most worrying contemporary developments in the politics of European and other Western democracies. The rise of

populism has been mirrored by a large, growing body of scholarship examining its origins, characteristics, trajectories and effects in various national contexts (e.g. Canovan, 1981, 2005; Taggart, 2000; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell

2008; Wodak 2015; Moffitt 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

A small but growing part of the work on Europe's right-wing populism looks at the latter's connections with history, and more generally the past. For example, comparisons between contemporary populism and a number of historical experiences — above all inter-war Fascism — are often made to identify analogies and differences in the nature and broader political context leading to either phenomenon (e.g. McDougall 2016; Eatwell 2017; Finchelstein 2017; 2018). Other scholars examine history “genealogically,” that is trying to trace causal links between past events and critical junctures and the emergence and success of today's populist movements, operating through institutional as well as cultural/ideological mechanisms (e.g. Taggart 2000; Fieschi 2004; Mammone 2009; Caramani and Manucci 2019).

A third way in which right-wing populism and the past can be linked is by looking at the way populists use history in their language, references and symbols as a way to win and consolidate popular support. A less systematically analysed aspect of the populism/history nexus is populists' use (and abuse) of the past. This not only sheds much light on the ideological and cultural make-up of these political movements but also tells us a lot about their voters.

Broadly speaking, one can split the politically exploitable past into two categories: the good, or “noble” past, and the bad or “dark” past. The former comprises all those events, historical stages or individual characters that are seen in a mostly positive light within a country's cultural mainstream, and that help articulate a nation's self-image and a national imaginary. Gilded stories of national independence, liberation or unification the celebration of national heroes, war victories, and the like belong to the noble past. The “dark” past, conversely, includes parts of (national) history that are commonly viewed negatively and as a source of national shame. Fascism, collaboration with it, and war, as well as colonial and imperial atrocities occupy

a central place in Europe's dark past. Yet, depending on the countries concerned, other episodes and stages (for instance, anti-Semitism, racism, genocide, civil war, dictatorship, and so forth) may carry equal weight.

While right-wing populism (ab)uses both pasts, we contend that its link with the dark past is especially worth examining. The largely uncontroversial (at least nationally) nature of the noble past yields two results. The first is that populists have to compete with other parties in exploiting history for political purposes. The second is that such exploitation is usually a kind of ‘appropriation race’ to use the good bits, with all the parties and movements (including populists) each trying to pass themselves off as the true heirs of a given historical stage, figure, and so on.¹ The dark past is an altogether different game that right-wing populism mainly plays on its own. Yet populism's dalliance with the dark past poses several challenges in using it for political ends. Thus looking at the way populists deal with these challenges not only helps trace the contours of their ideational outlook but also yields a better understanding of the discursive and rhetorical tools, expedients and manipulation these movements use in their quest for (mainstream) political support.

This paper looks at three ways a sector of right-wing populism uses and abuses the dark past. They are: (a) the positive reassessment of dark history; (b) the recourse to fake history; (c) the evocation and subsequent denial of connections with the dark past. The goal is not so much to test an exhaustive typology but rather (and more modestly) to start putting some order to this topic and smooth the path for more systematic studies later on. This exploratory analysis will use the cases of Italy and The Netherlands to illustrate the ways in which right-wing populists exploit the dark past. This selection of cases is, broadly speaking, in

1 Consider, for instance, repeated attempts by Italy's Silvio Berlusconi — in many ways a founding father of contemporary right-wing populism in Europe — to acquire political legitimacy and respectability by portraying himself and his *Forza Italia* party as carrying the legacy of Alcide De Gasperi, a founder of both the Italian Christian Democratic party and the country's post-WWII republic (*La Repubblica* 2003).

line with a “most different” comparative research design. While Italy and The Netherlands are quite different in terms of political history, political culture, national imaginaries and the mobilisation of collective historical memory, both countries have seen the upsurge of tainted historical tropes, metaphors and references in right-wing populist discourse, as will become clear below. By choosing two different political and cultural contexts within which right-wing populists have employed similar discursive, rhetorical and narrative strategies, we hope to show the plausibility of our preliminary classification of cases.

In the next three sections of the paper, we expound the three above-mentioned modes of populist (ab) use of the past. For each of them we present, first, a general description, and then illustrations from Italy and The Netherlands. In the fifth and final section we conclude by recapping our argument and reflecting on the implications of our findings for future work on the theme of populism and the past.

REASSESSING THE DARK PAST

The most straightforward way in which right-wing populists use and manipulate history is simply by putting the dark past in a positive light. This, we submit, is done mainly through three, partly overlapping, discursive strategies. The first is by simply reinterpreting certain controversial historical events, junctures, or characters more positively. Here, those aspects, angles and nuances that put them in a better light are the ones that get highlighted. The second is by shifting and keeping the narrative focus on some (inevitably) positive aspects of an overall negative historical stage or experience. The third is by minimising the gravity of and/or national responsibility for those bits of the dark past that are harder to downplay, presenting them as mistakes, the work of traitors, actions taken under duress, and so forth.

Taken together, these three ways of reassessing history amount to an ambitious endeavour by populists to recast bits of the dark past as noble. The goal, in do-

ing so, is twofold: on the one hand, populists aim to mobilise and embolden a certain part of the electorate on the far right of the political spectrum (especially if these voters are still sitting on the fence). On the other hand, and perhaps even more ambitiously, populists want to push the dark past into the cultural mainstream so that they can court more moderate parts of the electorate by reassuring them that it is safe to vote for right-wing parties.

In Italy, reassessment of the dark past mainly covers the Fascist period. Such re-evaluation is also made by the left end of the political spectrum, especially as left-wing parties shift to the centre (e.g. Mammone 2006; *La Stampa* 2018; Curridori 2018). Yet unsurprisingly, it is among right-wing parties that such revisionism of *Il ventennio* [the twenty years of Fascist rule] is most common. Such attempts usually come as variations on the common theme of “Mussolini also did good things,” gilding the dictatorship’s achievements in an effort to rehabilitate the country’s Fascist past. This excerpt from Michaela Biancofiore (in Ruccia 2013), a prominent member of *Forza Italia* (the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi), expresses this kind of revisionism well.

Mussolini did many positive things, [especially] in the area of infrastructure, and in re-launching Italy. ... He then took the country to war on Hitler’s side and that was a mistake. But take Bolzano ... [when] Fascism arrived here, there were still open-air sewers... sewer networks in Italy, not just in Alto Adige, were built by Mussolini. Motorways were built by Mussolini. In Bolzano, the whole area where the hospital now stands, that vast piece of land would not exist today ... because back then there was a swamp, which [the Fascist government] drained exactly as it did with The Pontine Marshes ... where they created jobs for many peasants from Veneto, who then settled there. ... These things cannot be forgotten. ... It is true that [Mussolini] was a dictator but dictators sometimes leave behind great works. ... Like all great men — and Mussolini was a great man of history — it was

not so much him but rather his inner circle ... who perpetrated violence in his name.²

The above quotation contains many of the tropes of this kind of reinterpretation, including the notion that Benito Mussolini was a victim of his entourage. Roberta Lombardi, one of the leaders of the Five Star Movement, proposed a very similar depiction of “Good Fascism” in a controversial blog post on the topic (in Sofia 2013): “before it degenerated, [Fascism] had a national sense of community taken fully from Socialism, and great respect for the State and for family.” Here, it is little wonder that Matteo Salvini’s far right *Lega* has come up with the most extreme reassessments. In an interview, Mario Borghezio — a notorious party firebrand — (in Davi 2015) took historical reassessment beyond Italy’s borders, to propose a positive reinterpretation of the Nazi regime:

If there is a character [of that period] that I very much like, it is Walther Darré (who was what we would today call Minister for the Environment). It was he who introduced environmentalism in politics. ... not to mention [Nazi advances in] other areas such as scientific and cancer research. ... There has yet to be a historiographic school able to better interpret that period. ... Of course, the Holocaust page remains a blot on the record.

In contrast to Italy’s associations with Fascist movements or actors, such references have remained a taboo in the Dutch political landscape up until the present day, apart from a marginal neo-Nazi fringe. References to the Dutch inter-war National Socialist movement (*Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging*) are used sparsely, though hyperbolically by the left and the right alike to accuse (political) opponents of (high) treason, Fascism or racism. As such, it is not inter-war authoritarianism or Fascism that shape right-wing populist’s discursive strategies on the dark past. Rather, the colonial past has been (mis)used to whitewash one of the blackest pages in Dutch history. Whereas the public and intellectual discourse on the history of slavery and enslavement, imperialism, and colonial

violence (particularly the post-war colonial conflict in Indonesia) has increasingly accepted the nation’s collective guilt, right-wing populist or ‘nativist’ leaders tend to challenge this interpretation. Worryingly, centrist politicians have also begun tapping into this revisionism, thus confirming Ruth Wodak’s (2015) observation of right-wing populist *topoi* becoming mainstream in political discourse.

Ever since the Christian-Democratic Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende infamously proposed the invocation of the “Dutch East India Company mentality” in 2006, which was heavily criticised by the media and parliament, references to the colonial past in political discourse have been contrite. Against the backdrop of the disclosure of new historical revelations of Dutch imperial misbehaviour and atrocities, there is a broad scholarly and public consensus on Dutch wrong-doings overseas.

Recently, statues of (in)famous captains and traders of the Dutch East India Company, as well as streets, squares and buildings named after them, became contested as part of the globally emerging discussion about “decolonising” society and public spaces. In this context, right-wing populists and nativists started deploying an apologetic counter-narrative on a “noble” or even nostalgic colonial past.

When a bust of a 17th century aristocratic slave-trader was removed from a public building, the right-wing national-populist Martin Bosma (member of Geert Wilders Freedom Party, PVV) saw it as “part of an endless ‘politically correct’ iconoclasm threatening our history and our culture” (in *Elsevier* 2018). Similarly, Thierry Baudet, the leader of the conservative-nationalist *Forum voor Democratie*, nostalgically argued that “once, the whole world belonged to us” after which he added that the “last bit of grandeur” should not be given up, referring to the overseas Dutch territories in The Antilles (in *Trouw* 2017). On other occasions, Baudet and his party used depictions of (alleged) East India Company ships and at one point he had an interview on a replica vessel because the East India Company “was a splendid enterprise and an adventure like no

² This and all subsequent translations from Italian and Dutch are by the authors of the article.

other" (*Forum* 2017). Many similar examples may be mentioned here, including statements made by local right-wing populists, that challenge the narrative of colonial guilt and reiterate 19th century-style celebrations of a glorious imperial past shaped by the splendid virtues of the Dutch.

As such, the piecemeal reassessment of the Dutch colonial past in terms of being complicit in the slave trade, enslavement, genocidal violence, and the oppression of peoples, has been challenged by the revisionists. This revisionism has three strands: (1) Apologism ("good things came out of colonialism"); (2) Nativism (some critics see it as "whitewashing" "black" history); (3) Nostalgia ("we should be proud of our colonial achievements"). Such responses are largely represented by right-wing populists in Dutch political and public discourse. National virtues and ideals are projected on a mythical past and the "dark side" of that history is downplayed or simply ignored.

USING FAKE HISTORY

As well as re-assessing historical stages, facts and characters, populists can simply make up history, inventing events, embellishing other cases, using wrong data, invoking imaginary pictures of the past and so forth. They engage in what Furedi (2018, 87) has termed the manipulation of memory "in order to manufacture a glorious golden age and a heroic national past". We call these strategies "fake history" to highlight their connection with the now popular notions of "fake news" or "post-truth" claims, which populists are particularly apt to resort to in mobilising their electorate. Making up historical facts and data is a slightly more sophisticated version of the same game.

This second kind of abuse of history is similar to and sometimes overlaps the first. In a way, re-assessing certain historical events, stages or characters is an exercise in falsifying history. The historian Andrea Mammone (2006) captures the overlap between these two kinds of distortion quite well with the notion of "artificial history". To the largely undisputed historical narratives

and interpretations of the past, "fake history" adds something new to colloquial understandings of the dark past. It presents inaccurate, false counter-evidence to mitigate a given dark past. It might, subsequently, disclose an alternative "darker" past of "others". These might involve circulating exaggerated or made-up facts, data or events but may also imply the depiction of an imagined "fact-free" past that fits the populist allegory of the people's "true history".

While populists' goals in using fake history are largely similar to those behind historical reassessment, fake history seems less likely than the previous case to show top-down dynamics. While some fake history is fostered by political leaders, the latter need to tread carefully lest they be publicly debunked. Therefore, this kind of abuse of history mainly spreads sideways rather than trickling down from the top. Needless to say, social media are a particularly conducive channel for spreading such lies (for instance through historical memes).

The fabrication of parts of Fascist history is a prolific field in Italy's political discourse. A particularly recurrent theme, closely connected to the re-assessment of Mussolini's regime, is the attribution to the latter of achievements that in fact belong to other periods of history. A common preconception is that the Fascist regime set up the first countrywide pension system and the corresponding pension fund, INPS (*Istituto nazionale della previdenza sociale*). This piece of fake history — the forerunner of the INPS was founded in 1898 — has gained wide currency in recent years among right-wing populists in their efforts to show how the oft-slated Fascist regime was more compassionate than today's mainstream, technocratic governments and their obsession with fiscal discipline. The League leader Matteo Salvini (in Mollica 2018) is a frequent proponent of this piece of fake history: "Many good things were done during the Fascist period, for instance the introduction of the pension system". Echoing Salvini, Roberta Lombardi (in *Globalist* 2018) added "When it comes to Fascism, there is a principle [i.e. anti-Fascism] in our Constitution to which I wholly adhere. But if I think about the INPS, I believe that it

was a victory for civilisation”.

Instead of attributing someone else's achievements to the Fascist regime, another branch of fake history minimises or even denies the dictatorship's crimes, violence and the destruction it wrought at home and abroad. In this category we find every conceivable variation on the theme of “Good Italian, Bad German” which blames all of Italy's worst acts during WWII to the “evil influence” of Nazi Germany (e.g. Mammone 2006; Morgan 2009; Focardi 2013). Once again, while this sort of narrative is also used beyond the right of the political spectrum, it is right-wing populist movements that find it especially useful politically. Another case of this kind of fake history is shown by Silvio Berlusconi's extravagant claim (in Hooper 2003) that “Mussolini never killed anyone ... [he] sent people on holiday”, referring to the regime's practice of confining political enemies in remote places, such as islands, to neutralise them politically by cutting their links with the rest of society.

Last but not least, some fake history stresses Italy and Italians as victims of foreigners as an indirect way of softening criticism of the Fascist regime. A case in point is that of the “Foibe Massacres” of Italians living in Dalmatia and Venezia Giulia by Yugoslav partisan, a historical event far from being fake but for which the number of victims is regularly inflated by right-wing populists well beyond the proven figures. Interestingly, this is also a case where photos have been shamelessly used to whip up hate. For instance, there is the now infamous picture showing an allegedly Yugoslav group of soldiers preparing to execute five unarmed civilians. This is used over and over again by right-wingers (e.g. by former Minister and President of the Lazio region, Francesco Storace, in Lonigro 2016) to demonstrate the cruelty of Communist partisans against harmless Italians. Experts have proven that the picture shows the exact opposite — namely Italian soldiers (recognisable by their uniforms) about to execute some Slovenian civilians during the Fascist occupation of Slovenia in WWII.

In The Netherlands, wartime experiences of National

Socialism, the Holocaust and collaboration with the Nazi occupiers still translate into a dichotomous moral scheme of “good” and “evil” in public discourse and attempts to re-write the story are avoided (at least publicly). Consequently, World War II-related matters are usually shunned by right-wing populists in their invention of fake histories. As with the reassessment of a dark national past, the colonial and imperial Holland of yore is used to spin fake histories or to present fact-free historical illustrations. Clearly tying in with the apologetic counter-narrative of a noble Dutch imperial past, right-wing populists have spoken about “Dutch victimhood” in colonial history. Although this is a subtler kind of manipulation than fake histories, in this discursive strategy Dutch right-wing populists make highly dubious historical claims peppered with alleged ‘facts’ that always turn out to lack clear empirical support and transparent references. One recurring trope is the alleged enslavement of Dutch (white) people by Muslim Arabs.

Starting as a loose reference to a polemic article in the *Jewish World Review* by the American economist Thomas Sowell (2010), the idea that more Europeans were enslaved by Muslims in North Africa than Africans enslaved in the United States was taken up by anti-Islam politicians. In The Netherlands, Martin Bosma echoed Sowell's claim in a provocative book, written as an indictment of the “left-wing”, cosmopolitan vested interests in Dutch and European politics and society. Bosma argues that public understanding of the Dutch national past amounts to “historical photo-shopping” by overlooking “centuries of Islamic dominion” to which Dutchmen and other Europeans were “subjected” (Bosma 2010). As Sowell's claim went viral again in 2016, a Dutch quality newspaper decided to fact-check it (NRC 2016). Initially, the NRC confirmed Sowell's claims. Thierry Baudet re-tweeted the fact-check a year later in a new public controversy, this time over the practice of black-facing during the arrival of *Sinterklaas*, a Dutch Christmas festivity with strong colonialist and racist connotations. As public intellectuals and historians started pointing to historical inaccuracies and false evidence in NRC's fact check, the newspaper rectified

its statement and concluded that Sowell's claim was false and unsustainable. Baudet and his party, however, kept alluding to the "Dutch slaves" trope at rallies. This is what Fascism and populism expert Federico Finchelstein (2019) referred to as the populists' use of "deliberate falsehood as a weapon against the truth" when it comes to history.

Another discursive strategy frequently employed by right-wing populists, particularly by Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), is the invocation of a historically inaccurate national image. This false image is shaped by vague historical iconography of a homogenous, self-governing Dutch nation. In early November 2017, Wilders (in the *Tweede Kamer* [Lower House, Dutch Parliament] 2017) delivered an impassioned speech in parliament on such an imaginary Dutch past, on which core values of self-determination, national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity were projected:

Our country was once the most beautiful country in the world, with its own borders, its own culture. We spent our money on our own people. We had decent health care for our elders ... We had a strong, self-willed, and above all a proud country ... Nobody was able to break us. We were sovereign. We took our own decisions. We were masters of our own country and our own borders ... The Netherlands was The Netherlands. How different ... is it today! Our country is up for grabs. Our interests have been harmed. Many Dutchmen have become aliens in their own nation ... Our country, our home, the miracle that our ancestors have built with blood, sweat and tears, is being given away.

When the progressive liberal MP Alexander Pechtold asked Wilders which period he was actually referring to, Wilders replied: "Before 1850, approximately". This sort of anachronistic blending of chauvinist welfarism, national sovereignty and ethno-cultural unity has served repeatedly, both visually and discursively, as a mythical national imaginary — a "fake" national past that depicts the people's historical "heartland" and forms part of Wilder's political discourse (Taggart

2000). Though not directly linked to countering a dark national past, this mythical national imaginary clearly challenges the empirically sustained "dark" Dutch past that has risen to prominence in intellectual and public discourse. In his study on the Freedom Party, Koen Vossen (2017, 41) argues that such narratives of the alleged historicity of 'the people' fit the construction of a national culture that is a "recognisable, indivisible phenomenon that goes back centuries" and should serve as the bedrock of "national pride".

EVOKING AND THEN DENYING CONNECTIONS TO THE DARK PAST

Populists also use references to the dark past in a third, subtler way by distancing themselves from and denying connections between themselves and negative historical cases, periods or characters. This is a last resort, so to speak, which populists adopt on those aspects of the dark past that are broadly deemed unacceptable and that are unlikely to be down-played or falsified. Racism in general or anti-Semitism in particular are examples of these aspects.

What is interesting in such denials is that they very often come after right-wing populists have actually done or said something that evokes, in the audience's minds, the very connection that is later denied. Such a response is not altogether surprising. The two parts, hinting and denial, often go hand in hand in what looks like a perverse "bait and switch" move, in which the populist 'kills two birds with one stone': on the one hand, he/she gains credit in the eyes of extreme sections of the electorate through the use of certain statements, symbols, or some subtler forms of "dog whistling" (Wodak 2015). On the other hand, through denial they reassure the more moderate voters and political actors about their democratic credentials. This apparently inconsistent but fully intentional dual message is an established communicative feature of right-wing movements, as documented for instance by Cheles (2010) in connection with Italy's post-Fascist party *Alleanza Nazionale*.

As shown above, Italian right-wing populists often woo part of the population by putting a gloss on the country's Fascist past. At times the appeal is brutal and without excuses. However, here we are talking of a softer approach that eschews plain-speaking and instead draws on symbols, buzzwords, gestures, and the like. For example, Matteo Salvini would never openly present himself as a Fascist sympathiser. Yet he has been photographed both in the company of the leadership of *Casapound* — a social movement openly inspired by the Fascist ideology — and wearing clothes from a brand connected to it. This makes one wonder where his sympathies lie.

Salvini's most recent invocation of Fascism, however, relates to the use, via social media, of a number of buzzwords and quotes commonly associated with *Il ventennio* [the 20-year period of Fascist rule]. In a response to his critics tweeted on the 29th of July 2018 (the same day as Mussolini's birthday), Salvini wrote "many enemies, much honour" (*tanti nemici, tanto onore*), which is only a slight variation on the slogan *molti nemici, molto onore*, famously attributed to the *Duce* (*Il Messaggero* 2018). Then there were two similar "incidents", in which Salvini used Fascist quotations phrases within a few days of each other. In one, Salvini wrote on his Facebook page that "He who halts is lost" (*chi si ferma è perduto*) (Ruccia 2018). In another, as he commented on the European Commission's warnings about Italy's 2019 budget, Salvini proudly stated "I don't give a damn!" (*Me ne frego!*) (Adnkronos 2018).

The Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*) is by no means immune from such invocations. Beppe Grillo — the comedian who co-founded, and remains the charismatic leader of the Five Star Movement — for example once stated in the presence of some journalists that he had nothing against a *Casapound* member joining his movement — a statement that many saw as an attempt to attract support from that side of the political spectrum (*La Stampa* 2013). Speaking of symbols, Grillo often intersperses his shows with the call *Italiani!* shouted in the same manner as Mussolini used to, as he addressed crowds from his Palazzo Venezia

balcony. Yet this effective comedic device could, once again, also be seen as an attempt to wink at a certain part of the electorate, while at the same time defusing the issue of Fascism by making fun of it.

The latter observation is important because it takes us straight into Italian right-wing populists' preferred strategy for denying any link or proximity to the country's dark past. For instance, they claim that Fascism is a thing of the past and thus any attempt to link them to that ideology would not only be false but also meaningless. This strategy is especially important for the Five Star Movement, which has built much of its political narrative on its transcendence of the left and right labels. For instance, when asked about his father's open adherence to the Fascist ideology, Alessandro Di Battista (in Sannino and Vecchio 2017), one of the Five Star leaders, responded that it is more important to be honest than anti-Fascist, and that "talking about Fascism in 2016 is like talking about The Guelphs and The Ghibellines." [12th and 13th Century political factions in Mediaeval Italy]

Denying the possibility of a return of Fascism under a different guise is a recurrent way of denying embarrassing connections on the part of more openly right-wing populists. Both Salvini and Giorgia Meloni — the leader of *Fratelli d'Italia* [Brothers of Italy], a smaller right-wing party — used this approach when Luca Traini (the *Lega's* former municipal candidate and a Nazi sympathiser) fired on a number of African immigrants in Macerata in February 2018. The racist nature of the attack and the use of political violence in the country was clear. Yet Salvini (in *Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2018) commented that "This idea of a Fascist danger, of the return of Fascism, of a new wave of black shirts, is surreal to me, and it is used by a political faction that has shown its hollowness over the last six years". Salvini's words echoed those by Giorgia Meloni (in *Globalist* 2018):

Politicians should worry about those [foreign] terrorists based in Italy rather than continuing this surreal debate on the return of Fascism. What happened in Macerata is the deed of a violent

lunatic, period. If *Mein Kampf* was among his readings, that's his business. It is not the return of Fascism.

In its formative stages, Geert Wilders's Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), founded in 2006, associated itself with symbols previously used by the Dutch National Socialist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. When the party presented its logo in 2008, historians were quick to point out its troubling resemblance. The seagull at the centre of the logo combined with the word "freedom" was very similar to a 1941 poster printed by the Dutch National Socialist movement and the logo of its youth league (*Historisch Nieuwsblad* 2008). Geert Wilders responded furiously, by stating that he cannot "Take into account every bad organisation in the world that has used symbols" and that the comparison made between his party and the national socialists could only occur to someone with "a sick mind" (in *Trouw* 2008). In other statements, he distanced himself from any National Socialist inclination or endorsement arguing that the seagull was the idea of the advertising company he commissioned to design the party logo. Despite the obvious similarities, the Freedom Party kept the logo unchanged, though it has featured less frequently in its propaganda over the last few years.

A few years later, the Freedom Party again sported a symbol that was reminiscent of the Dutch National Socialists' visual repertoire. In 2011, two MPs of the Freedom Party decorated their parliamentary office windows with the so-called 'Prince's Flag' [*Prinsenvlag*], a horizontal tricolour of orange, white and blue. This particular flag was frequently used by the Dutch National Socialists in the 1930s and 1940s as an alternative to the official Dutch flag (red, white, blue) but has had a much longer history. The flag was first flown by Orangists during the Dutch revolt against Spanish domination (1568-1648) and also inspired the South African government to design the flag that became associated with the apartheid regime (*The Economist* 2015). During the last few decades, Dutch neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist fringe movements have also adopted the flag in their iconography. As such, the flag has multi-layered meanings that allude to an opaque

nexus of patriotism, racism and collaborationism. No official response was forthcoming from either Wilders or the two MPs involved but the flags were removed from the party offices as newspapers widely reported on their dark connotations.

That was not the end of the Prince's Flag however. During a Freedom Party rally in The Hague in September 2013, various versions of the tricolour were spotted in the audience, showing how Wilders's supporters accepted it as a banner. In the same week, four MPs of the Freedom Party, among them Bosma, wore a Prince's Flag pin on their lapel during the annual parliamentary general debate (NRC 2013). No formal public statement was issued by the party or Wilders, after questions arose about why the MP's wore the pin that had clear ties with Dutch National Socialism. In the years that followed, Martin Bosma kept praising the flag as "The century-old symbol of our freedom" (*Twitter* 2015), also alluding to a "Great Dutch cultural union" between the Netherlands, Flanders and South Africa's Afrikaner community (*de Volkskrant* 2014).

Of a different kind, but nevertheless similarly tapping into the no-go zone of the Dutch dark past of World War II and interwar Fascism, is a remark made by Thierry Baudet at an event in 2017 that was picked up on by radical right-wing blogs and, ultimately, by the mainstream media. Baudet observed a "self-hate ... that we try to transcend ... by homeopathically diluting the Dutch population with all peoples of the world" (*NPO Radio 1* 2017). At first, Baudet rejected all racist accusations and refused to accept the reminiscence with pre-war racial purity metaphors and eugenics. In a national television show he stated that he "didn't want to say anything about race ... It is about culture", then adding that he would not use those words again seeing what sort of "bewildering" fuss it had created (*NPO 1* 2017). Nevertheless, coded, racialised variations have been included in his declarations on alleged 'national self-hate' or on *omvolking*, or *Grand Remplacement* in the words of the French conspiracy theorist and writer Renaud Camus. Both terms are used to refer to a supposed elitist conspiracy whose purpose is to mix ethnic Dutchmen with other

‘peoples’, something to which both Wilders as well as Baudet have often referred (Oudenampsen 2019).

These examples show how right-wing populists and nativists use tainted tropes from a dark past by denying any connection with that past and distancing themselves from it. However, they also refuse to accept that particular expressions, metaphors or symbols contain semantics that have an undeniable relationship with a given dark national past. One could argue that complex or historicist reasoning about the past is consciously avoided in favour of the projection of a national ideal onto a mythical or nostalgic past which, allege the populists, has been obscured by the “politically correct” and “cosmopolitan” elites.

UNDERSTANDING THE POPULIST MOBILISATION OF NATIONAL PASTS

Mainstream politicians often articulate a “noble” past as part of Whiggish readings of ongoing progress and cultural advancement; (national) history moves forward to ever greater freedom, prosperity, equality and inclusion. References to well-known “dark” historical episodes may also be part of this narrative, emphasising national resilience and the polity’s ability to return to the noble path of progress. The arrival of a substantial number of right-wing populist politicians in parliaments and executive bodies in Europe has challenged this long-standing discursive, rhetorical and narrative strategy in mainstream politics. The past has become a new battlefield in which the populists challenge the hitherto accepted explanations of shameful periods of history and shamelessly attempt to downplay them or brighten them up. Exploring this nexus between populism and the dark past, we have proposed three analytically distinct strategies with which right-wing populists assess, address or allude to their nation’s dark historical episodes: (1) the positive reassessment of dark history; (2) the recourse to fake history; (3) the evocation and subsequent denial of connections with the dark past. All three strategies disclose how right-wing populists read against the grain of established master narratives of a nation’s dark past.

As our examples from Italy and the Netherlands have shown, these pasts revolve around recurring themes and tropes. In Italy these are drawn from the era of Mussolini’s Fascist reign, whereas in the Netherlands the colonial past, both early modern as well as new imperialist, is the main — though not the only — breeding ground for right-wing populist politically motivated rewriting of the past. Regardless of the discursive strategy employed, the (ab)uses of dark pasts are geared towards the reclaiming of a “mythical” or “true” national past that has been blurred by hegemonic political correctness. The populists present this fabricated past as a crucial reminder to the people in its struggle against: migration, globalism, Europe, corrupted elites and national “self-hate” — the forces that have thwarted national progress. Whether reassessing a dark episode, inventing historical facts or images, or engaging with a “forbidden” past, the strategies employed often culminate in direct or indirect allusions to an imagined past in which national virtues and self-determination went hand-in-hand with the ethno-cultural homogeneity of the country’s natives. At the end of the day, it is all about reclaiming the “true” history of the people. As populism scholar Cas Mudde (2016) puts it, people “let themselves be seduced by an imaginary public past that is mostly in line with their own imagined private past anyway”. This process may result from top-down public interventions (as with reassessing a dark past) to more horizontal mobilisations of historical inaccuracies (as with fake history). A recent study analyses why Dutch and French voters opted for Wilders and Le Pen. It reveals this twofold dynamic, showing how fabricated pasts tap into vernacular national identity discourses that strike a chord among supporters of right-wing populism (Damhuis 2018).

This essay has only begun to address and order the political mobilisation of dark pasts by right-wing populists in public and political discourse. In line with a “most different case” strategy of comparison, it has explored a limited number of illustrative Italian and Dutch instances in which discursive strategies are applied to a contested past that strikes a chord with

the general public. Research on the radical right or right-wing populism has shown that these strategies have spread across Europe, other prominent examples, to name but a few, being the late radical right Austrian politician Jörg Haider, the French radical right Le Pen dynasty and the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán. A comparative, systematic empirical inquiry

into these and other examples is needed to test the preliminary typology of discursive strategies we have proposed. We believe such a research agenda will enhance our understanding of the ideational make-up of right-wing populists and the way in which the past is mobilised politically in their discursive and rhetorical repertoires.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Stefan Couperus

Dr Stefan Couperus is an Associate Professor of European Politics and Society at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He obtained his PhD in modern history at the same university in 2009 (with the highest distinction).

His research interests include the history of democratic theory and practice, the history of urban governance and planning, and uses of the past in contemporary political discourse.

Pier Domenico Tortola

Pier Domenico Tortola is Assistant Professor of European Policy and Society at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. His recent research interests focus on crisis management policies in the Euro Zone and the impact of the financial crisis on EU governance and institutions. He was awarded a PhD in Politics from Oxford University.

